

# Five Alternative Assessment Styles for ELL Students' Vocabulary Development in a Mainstream Elementary Classroom

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**Abstract:** English Language Learners (ELL) are one of the fastest growing sub-groups in the classroom today, and the knowledge gap between ELL students and native language speakers grows wider. Vocabulary comprehension is becoming a deep-rooted problem in many classrooms; therefore, it is important to identify ways to accurately assess an ELL student's vocabulary knowledge and retention. A variety of assessment styles and tools should be utilized in the classroom to better reflect an ELL student's vocabulary knowledge and growth. There are five alternative assessment styles teachers should consider when choosing tests in the classroom: formative, performance, quality reviews, badges and micro credentials, and multiple measures. Educators face challenges of learning what assessment will best suit a standard and a student's abilities. As future generations present educators with learning challenges, these five assessment styles can provide teachers with a richer understanding of their ELL students' capabilities and retention.

## Five Alternative Assessment Styles for ELL Students Vocabulary Development in a Mainstream Elementary Classroom

Identifying ways to accurately assess an English Language Learner's (ELL) vocabulary knowledge and retention in mainstream K-5 classrooms is important because ELL vocabulary comprehension has become a deep-rooted problem in many classrooms. It is important to become familiar with traditional and alternative assessment materials in order to recognize an ELL student's growth in vocabulary. Traditional pencil and paper, multiple choice, or essay testing may not be the most beneficial way of gathering information on an ELL student's vocabulary knowledge. Non-conventional assessments can better help an ELL student portray their abilities, and five assessment styles and tools should be utilized in the classroom to better reflect an ELL student's vocabulary knowledge and growth (Silverman & Hines, 2009).

### *The Difficulties ELL Students Encounter*

When entering a new school, an ELL student is required to take an English proficiency test. The results of this test place this student into one of two categories, Limited English Proficient (LEP) or Initially Fluent English Proficient (I-FEP). An ELL student who tests into the LEP category, requires additional support prior to entering an English only mainstream classroom, and an ELL student, who tests into the I-FEP category, enters an English only mainstream classroom and receives additional support while in the classroom (Dean, 2019). Unfortunately, many schools are not equipped with teachers qualified to work with ELL students, and only about 2.5% of teachers who work with ELL students are certified for this position. Many

ELL educators only participate in a few professional development courses, which leaves them underprepared for ELL instruction (McKeon, 2005).

ELL students make up 10% of the student population in schools (Sanchez, 2017). It is important for teachers to understand that ELL students are capable individuals that may need additional support from a young age. By the time fourth grade finishes, curriculum becomes more complex and difficult, which makes it harder for an ELL student to comprehend educational vocabulary. Accordingly, it is vital that classroom vocabulary assessments be created to help students learn, grow, and achieve throughout the school year. Results of vocabulary assessments are just as important as they help educators determine what needs to be revisited and how an ELL student could be pushed to higher level skills. At the end of the school year, ELL students take another English Proficiency test to determine if they can be reclassified to Fluent English Proficient. If an ELL student meets the required score for reclassification, the student will no longer require additional support (Dean, 2019). Sadly, only 63% of ELL students graduate compared to the 82% of their peers, and only 1.4% of those ELL students who graduate take college entrance exams (Sanchez, 2017).

### **Five Alternate Assessment Types**

ELL students are one of the fastest growing subgroups in the classroom today, and the knowledge gap between ELL students and native language speakers grows wider. Educators continuously look for ways to accurately assess their students' knowledge, and becoming familiar with alternative assessment styles could benefit their ELL students (Gibson, 2016). Since students learn differently, incorporating different assessment techniques could highlight a student's strengths and weaknesses, which provide teachers with important education data (Rastegar & Safari, 2017).

Because of the data driven society, an educational assessment shift has been moving through school districts over the past few years, and educators are feeling the pressure to produce statistical results. Teachers try to find the best assessment techniques to measure student development and guide future learning directives. Outside the realm of traditional assessments, there are five alternative assessment styles that teachers should consider when choosing tests in the classroom: formative, performance, quality reviews, badges and micro-credentials, and multiple measures (Lash & Belfiore, n.d). These assessment strategies can help educators gather deeper understandings of a student's knowledge and can help students showcase their knowledge in opportunities that have not previously been available to them (Belfiore & Lash, 2017). Using these strategies in the mainstream classroom help all students, ELL and non-ELL alike; however, implementing alternative assessments throughout the year rather than solely traditional assessments will help more ELL students become reclassified as Fluent English Proficient (Belfiore & Lash, 2017; Grimes-Hillman et al., 2014; Sanchez, 2017; Dean, 2019). Understanding all five alternative assessment strategies and how best to apply them all can help general education teachers assess ELL students more effectively, increase all student achievement in the mainstream classroom, and improve scores on state tests for the mainstream classroom.

## ***Formative Assessment***

Educators commonly utilize formative assessments to evaluate their students' achievement. Formative assessments identify learning needs and academic progress and are a continuous analysis of a student's comprehension throughout a lesson, unit, or course (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). These low stakes non-graded assessments help teachers identify all students' strengths and weaknesses in order to prepare better lesson plans. Since formative assessments give instant feedback to a teacher, they are able to monitor the students learning abilities faster and adjust lessons accordingly (Belfiore & Lash, 2017).

A formative assessment is more of a learning technique rather than a test designed to gather detailed information on a student's understanding. These techniques are performed throughout the lesson and unit for a student's learning rather than a summative assessment which is typically given at the end of a lesson or unit and is of material learned (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). Exit slips, entrance tickets, concept maps, and highlighting are examples of effective formative assessment strategies. Exit slips or tickets consist of students writing down something they have learned from the lesson, but as an alternative, ELL students can verbally state to a teacher what they have learned. A concept map is a graphic organizer that webs how concepts are connected together. Highlighters can be used in a variety of ways to recognize words, answers, or definitions. A teacher can quickly ask the ELL student to highlight aspects in writing in order to determine if they have learned a specific skill (Guido, 2019).

Some educators believe that formative assessments are becoming overly used and not performed properly or that the assessment is not truly formative. In order for an assessment to be truly formative, it should not be graded. A formative assessment becomes a summative or performance assessment rather than formative when a grade is given. When a formative assessment is used to improve a student's understanding, it is being performed properly (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

## ***Performance Assessment***

Performance assessments are authentic simulations of real-world experiences that assess a student's abilities and understanding of concepts. Students show their knowledge of a skill by producing an authentic creation. Authentically designed performance assessments are graded on specific criteria, have clear expectations, and can use simulations as long as they are true to real-world situations. These assessments allow ELL students and non-ELL students alternative opportunities to equally demonstrate their skills and enjoy displaying their abilities in the mainstream classroom. When students enjoy their work, it motivates them, gives them a sense of pride, and provides them a feeling of accomplishment (The Editors, 2019).

Performance assessments typically encompass multiple concepts a student acquires and asks the student to connect the skills; however, it is important to remember that the assessment should emphasize the skill that needs to be learned (Brockhart, 2016). Examples of performance assessments include poster presentations, producing poetry, creating a comic, and debating a topic. In presentations, ELL students will need to present information found clearly with the correct vocabulary

terms. Poster presentations should be written to incorporate a question, findings, and conclusions on the information found. Debates are verbal discussions between two students on a certain concept. ELL students should be proficient with the vocabulary terms associated in the debate effort to argue their side of an issue (Kelly, 2019).

Many performance assessments involve a higher level of thinking, and if not executed with clear instructions and expectations, they may overwhelm ELL students. This style of assessment is difficult to compare since teachers have different standards. Performance assessments could be considered a judgement assessment as teachers evaluate the results with preconceived notions of each student's work ethic and ability; therefore, the assessment could become biased. In order for performance assessments to be graded fairly, a rubric should be set in place. This style of assessment should be focused on and used to measure a student's abilities in the vocabulary standard being assessed (The Editors, 2019).

### ***Quality Reviews***

Quality reviews collect data from observing and analyzing a student's interactions and learning experience within authentic context. The quality reviews assessment tool is a unique method that educators use to determine a student's work ethic and understanding of content. Quality review assessments take on more of a holistic approach where students take ownership of their learning and a personal responsibility to learn and rise to their own potential. Educators recognize the wholeness of the learner and take into consideration what was learned and how the learner applies it in the community (Belfiore & Lash, 2017).

A teacher needs to be extremely observant and diligent in using this style of assessment because it does not follow a rubric, does not have an answer key, and does not follow a script. Many poor traditional test takers, who are able to interact with their peers, educators, and community proficiently, have difficulty retrieving learning information during tests. There are a few questions a teacher must ask themselves when using this technique: Is the student able to use new vocabulary words in everyday conversation? Do they incorporate these words in their writing, or can they read the vocabulary words? These assessment type questions can be asked of ELL students and their peers without the need of specialized ELL assessment (Belfiore & Lash, 2017).

Educators may find challenges implementing quality reviews in the classroom. It is difficult to assign a grade to measuring a student's knowledge based on their experiences because every student has a unique background (School Around Us, n.d.). An applicable example of quality review could be periodic one-on-one interviews between a student and their teacher. During the interview, the teacher can ask the student broad questions about their life using current vocabulary words and concepts. The teacher's assessment is of the student's ability to converse and answer questions and not of the student's answer correctness. This assessment is helpful for all students, but it is particularly beneficial for the ELL students, who are able to demonstrate their understanding of vocabulary use in language (Belfiore & Lash, 2017).

## ***Badges and Micro Credentials***

Badges and Micro Credentials method of assessment involves a student achieving certain goals then receiving a series of badges. A micro credential or targeted skill has been accomplished when all the badges have been collected. Once a student has received all the badges for the credential, he or she can move on to the next micro credential. For ELL vocabulary skills, this style of assessment can become rewarding and motivating. The student feels accomplished when receiving the badge and can physically see their growth. Educators can use this method of assessment to inspire all students to work hard for the next micro credential (Greene, 2019).

Badges and micro credentials can help teachers determine a wide range of skills and utilize the information to create lessons that address an ELL student's needs. This style of assessment could suit higher level students as it indicates a competency level where a student continues to move up in education as they collect their micro credentials. Teachers using this strategy can easily see how well their students are progressing (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2013). This style of assessment could be difficult to assimilate between classrooms and could result in discontinuity if educators are not in communication and share the same badges and micro credentials. Students will receive comparable scores amongst the classrooms if a set system has been carefully devised (National Education Association, 2018).

## ***Multiple Measures***

A vocabulary multiple measure assessment could incorporate saying the word, defining the word, using the word in a sentence or story, using it in a poem, or finding synonyms and antonyms. By considering different applications of the word, an educator can determine if a student truly knows how to use the word. If a student can say the word and give a dictionary definition but cannot provide a connotation definition, a teacher could indicate that the student still needs help understanding the vocabulary term. In using multiple measures, the teacher can then prepare alterations and additional support in future lessons to help the student gain more knowledge of the term (Belfiore & Lash, 2017).

Multiple measure assessments should not only incorporate pencil and paper but several aspects of learning, including writing, reading, and verbal evaluation. Many times ELL students are able to either speak well, write well, or read well in the second language but struggle to incorporate all three. In a multiple measure assessment, all three areas are tested in an effort to help ELL students demonstrate their knowledge. Providing multiple measure assessments for ELL students gives them opportunities to showcase their knowledge in varied ways. Teachers can accurately pinpoint a student's strengths and weaknesses in a concept when using this style of assessment. Multiple measure assessments give teachers more than one factor to grade in order to determine an ELL students' knowledge (Grimes-Hillman et al., 2014).

Multiple measures style of assessment indicates where students are most successful, and it provides teachers with the information needed to alter lesson plans and provide ELL students with future assessments that can help showcase their best work. When using multiple measure assessment, it is important to determine

the measures being assessed and best practices (Grimes-Hillman et al., 2014). It is important for educators to be able to analyze the data produced from these assessments and grade consistently (Farley, et al. 2018). Multiple measure assessment allows teachers to evaluate an ELL student's abilities in all areas of a concept rather than a single representation (Grimes-Hillman et al., 2014).

## Conclusion

The education profession is ever evolving, and educators that are exposed to real-world data early will be prepared for the continuously changing classroom. It is important that teachers are familiar with these concepts in order to develop, implement, and grade these assessments (Farley et al., 2018). Learning what assessment will best suit a standard and a student's abilities presents another challenge educators face. It is the responsibility of educators to continue researching these and other alternative assessment methods. By including these assessments in the mainstream classroom, ELL students will be able to participate with non-ELL students without requiring additional or accommodating assessment strategies. As the future generations present educators with learning challenges, these five assessment styles can provide teachers with a richer understanding of their ELL students' capabilities and keep them integrated in the mainstream classroom (Belfiore & Lash, 2017).

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